

“The Creator of Work”

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Crest of Giovanni de' Bardi

This year marks the 450th anniversary of the birth of one of music's most important figures. His name is cherished in the world of opera, familiar in the broader world of classical music, and a virtual unknown to the population at large. What follows here is a review for some, and an introduction for others. It is the story of events that led to the beginnings of opera, and it is the story of Claudio Monteverdi, an historic figure whose musical contributions live to this day and richly deserve a place in our appreciation of the history of music and the creation of opera.

Beginnings

Music has always been a force of nature. For as long as people have spoken, they have also sung. Sung to their babies, sung in the fields, sung in caves to ward off evil spirits. But not until the 6th century B.C. did people begin to study and write down the architecture – the theory – of music. By 400 BC, Pythagoras was using music to express mathematical equations of the cosmic order, and music was widely held to have great therapeutic powers over physical and mental illness.

Orpheus, the Greek demigod, the human son of the god, Apollo, and the muse Calliope, became the religious symbol of music. Orpheus received the gift of music, the golden lyre, from his father and the gift of writing and singing in verse from his mother. Venerated as the greatest musician of all time, Orpheus had no rival, even among the gods. With his singing lyre, Orpheus led the beasts of the wilderness, moved trees on hillsides, and changed the course of rivers. Neither mortal nor nature could resist his spell: “He drew iron tears from Pluto’s cheeks and made Hades grant what love did seek.”¹ Jason and the Argonauts enlisted Orpheus in their quest for the Golden Fleece. The writings, poems and hymns of Orpheus became embedded in Greek religion and philosophy. They are present in recently discovered Greek manuscripts dating back to 340 BC, the oldest surviving manuscripts in Europe. The power of Orphic music in the republic (380 BC) was such that Plato wrote, “Music molds character; when modes and music change, the fundamental laws of the state change with them. Even the

¹ Bernheimer, K. Orpheus: Fifty New Myths, New York, Penguin Books, 2013.

soul learns harmony, rhythm and even a disposition toward justice ... from music.”

The Greeks’ first recorded interest in music theory is found in preserved hymns, some of which were carved in marble in Delphi in the 2nd century BC.² Apart from the few Greek fragments preserved in stone tablets, the earliest music to survive is the plainsong of the medieval Christian church. Given an official form in the 6th century AD during the Papacy of Gregory the First, these songs are now known as Gregorian chant.³

The character of music written for abbey and cathedral choirs slowly increased in complexity until, in the 11th century, it is called polyphony (Greek for many sounds). The character of polyphony is such that each vocal line has approximately the same weight. The different voices are treated as equals, with paths interweaving, rather than any one voice taking the lead and being supported harmonically by the others. This

² Broad, William J., *The Oracle: Ancient Delphi and the Science behind Its Lost Secrets*, New York, Penguin, 2006.

³ Apel, Willi, *Gregonian Chant*, Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana Press, 1990.

polyphonic rhythm remained the music convention in Europe until the 16th century.

The Italian Renaissance masters transformed music in Italy and France with an artistic change that triumphed in the madrigal, a genre that evolved from the influence of the medieval troubadours: cheerful songs and dances with musicians using a great variety of instruments. The madrigal originally meant a pastoral song, but later usage applied to any lyric poem. Although the madrigal remained essentially polyphonic, it raised secular music to a new level, as Renaissance composers paid increasing attention to melody rather than recitativo (song-spoken words) or dramatic reciting.

Beginning in Florence in the late 16th century, there was a great interest in reviving classical Greek drama. This effort was part of a wider revival of antiquity characteristic of the Renaissance that came under the influence of an elite circle of literate humanists that gathered as the Camerata Fiorentina. Ferdinando I de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1587 to 1609, assembled a huge team of artists, poets, musicians,

architects and technicians under the intellectual guidance of Count Giovanni de' Bardi. The Florentine Camerata believed that contemporary society had been corrupted and that the solution lay in restoration of the ancient Greek style, although it had been lost for centuries.

They discussed all aspects of Greek cultures but chose to focus most of their effort on music and drama. Their first dramatic productions were called intermedia, or intermezzi. Thus, the Intermezzi became the musical steps between the epic dramas designed to unify the actions of the dramatic scenes.

Members of the group included the most erudite members of the community. In addition to Count Bardi, the convener, the Camerata included Vincenzo Galilei, father of the astronomer, Giulio Caccini, Pietro Strozzi, Ottavio Rinuccini, and Jacopo Peri, a renowned composer and singer and instrumentalist.

Enamored of the thought of Greek history and philosophy, members of the Camerata sought to reproduce the sound of

classical Greek music, even though they probably did not know what it actually sounded like. The Camerata favored the classical collaboration of drama and music, or drama set to music with stage effects and, dancing interfaced with the intermezzo.

The group conspired in an effort to revive ancient group music. Their strategy was built on the theoretical work of Girolamo Mei, a profound scholar of ancient Greece and humanism. Mei's theory was an important factor in the evolution of monody, an expressive solo song with simple chordal accompaniment, a further development of the Recitativo, or spoken voice.

Fundamentally, the Florentine Camerata created the ideas that subsequently have become known as opera.⁴ The Italian word opera means "work," both in the sense of labor done and results produced. "Opera" is derived from the Latin noun meaning work or service. The singular noun is opus. According

⁴ Palisca, Claude V., *The Florentine Camerata*, Music Theory Translation Series, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1989.

to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Italian was first used in 1639 in the sense “in which poetry, dance and music are combined.” The first recorded English usage of opera dates back to 1648.

Why was Florence so informative in the birth of opera? The courts of northern Italy, especially the Medici family in Florence, nurtured a confluence of cultural forces: 1) an established theatrical tradition; 2) a strong sense of civic unity; and 3) a commanding vision of music and music’s relationship to the cosmos. The Florentines were heirs to the civic and humanistic theories of ancient Greek theatrical music and sought to express their humanist ideas about the relationship between words and music to create a new art form, the opera. The third factor that lay behind Florence’s role in the genesis of opera was its revival of the neoplatonic world view of music as a magical role in the cosmos and man’s interface with all elements of the universe.

The Camerata sought to realize the transformative power of Orphic singing through musical relationship and solo song.

The Camerati believed that accompanied vocal expression could create and transmit an inter-emotional reality that could move listeners' souls and change society.

In 1597 Jacopo Peri, encouraged by the Camerati intelligentsia, composed a musical drama called *Dafne*. The drama was based on the myth of Apollo's tryst with the nymph Dafne. Unfortunately, *Dafne*, first performed in Florence in 1598 and recognized as the first opera, is lost. A later work by Peri, *Euridice*, composed in 1600, is the first operatic work to survive to the present day.

Opera quickly spread to other urban centers in Italy, Mantua, Rome, and Venice. In less than a decade after the earliest productions in Florence, the masterful composer of madrigals, Claudio Monteverdi, arrived like a supernova on the artistic scene. Although Monteverdi was employed in the court of the Duke of Mantua, some 125 miles to the north of Florence, where the seeds of opera were sown, he was keenly aware of the artistic breakthroughs of de' Bardi and Peri. To this evolution Monteverdi brought something new: He

eliminated long stretches of rhythmic, song-spoken words (recitativo) and replaced them with the genuinely flowing music that we know today as an aria.

Monteverdi provided us with the pivotal moment in the history of opera, for he created the first opera that has not only survived four hundred years but has also survived in the modern repertoire. It was most fitting then that Monteverdi and other academics chose *Orfeo*, or *Orpheus*, as their first operatic protagonist.

Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, a work of music and theater composed for the Court of Mantua in 1607, displayed a totally new sort of alchemy, managing to present the passionate expression of chaotic emotions with remarkable clarity and insight. *Orfeo*, now called "the first opera," really worked. And it is still working today in opera houses all over the world.

Claudio Giovanni Antonio Monteverdi was born in 1567 in Cremona in the Lombardic region south of Milan.⁵ Today, 450

⁵ Schrade, Leo, *Monteverdi: Creator of Modern Music*, London, Victor Gollancz LTD, 1979.

years later, Cremona is better known as the home of Nicolo Amati and Antonio Stradivari, 16th-century creators of the world's most celebrated violins. Monteverdi's father was a barber surgeon and apothecary who enjoyed music and placed Claudio under the tutelage of Marc' Antonio Ingegneri, an Italian composer and the maestro di cappella of Cremona Cathedral. Internationally renowned, Ingegneri mastered the musical *reservata*, a vocal style that later gave rise to "word painting," the emotive vocal styles of the madrigal and motet. The tutelage of Ingegneri was impactful in the early development of young Monteverdi.

Monteverdi, recognized for his musical precocity, published his first compositions at age 15, *Madrigal Spirituali*. As a result of these compositions and outstanding virtuosity on the violin, he was offered a position as a maestro di cappella for the court of Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua. The Duke was obsessed with the concept of musical theater and spectacle that grew from his family's connections with the Court of Florence. Therefore, he wished to establish his court as a center

of music to rival the Medici in Florence. He appointed the best musicians from across Europe, many of whom influenced the evolution of Monteverdi's style. Monteverdi was also able to frequently accompany the Duke on tours to France, Flanders and cities in the north, where he became acquainted with the contemporary schools of music of France. In travels to Florence, Monteverdi was exposed to the magical influence of the Camerata Bardi and the musical creativity of Peri and Galilei.

The Mantua Court of the Gonzagas played a large role in setting the stage for what became the first great opera. As a significant historical moment, the court created a position for the first female singer of opera, Europa Rossi – nicknamed Madama Europa -- a Jewish woman who performed in the intermedio *Il Roetto di Europa* during the wedding festivities for Francesco Gonzaga in 1608. Madama Europa disappeared when the Jewish ghetto was destroyed during the Austrian defeat of the Gonzagas, which brought to an end a 400-year rule of one of Europe's most princely families.

The fall of the House of Gonzaga was an inspiration for Act III, Scene II in *Hamlet*, called “The Murder of Gonzago” (“The Mousetrap”).

The Gonzagas had a long history of providing dramatic entertainment. For example, in the 15th century, the court staged a lyrical drama, *la Favola di Orfeo*, at least half of which was sung, rather than spoken. In 1598 Monteverdi helped the court musicians stage Giovanni Battista Guarini’s pastoral drama, which has been described as a watershed theatrical work. On October 6, 1600, while visiting Florence for the wedding of Maria de’ Medici to King Henry IV of France, Duke Vincenzo attended the production of Peri’s *Euridice*. Monteverdi and principal musicians from the Court of Gonzaga also attended that performance. The Duke quickly recognized the novelty of the new art form of dramatic entertainment and its potential for bringing prestige to those who sponsored it.

In 1606, Count Francesco and Duke Vincenzo commissioned Monteverdi to compose a work for the carnival season of 1607.

Alessandro Striggio, the son of a well-known composer, a young lawyer and career diplomat in the Court of Gonzago, was also present for the performance of *Euridice* in Florence. Striggio, using Virgil's telling of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and libretto for *Euridice*, wrote a libretto for a play in music. He acquired the services of a high-quality castrato from the duke's court of musicians.

When Monteverdi composed *Orfeo*, he had by this time a thorough grounding in musical theater, having been employed as a performer, arranger, stage-musician and composer for 16 years. The elements from which Monteverdi constructed his first opera score -- the aria, strophic song (so called for verse repeating), recitative, choruses, dance and musical interludes blended new and old elements into a unity that was unique. Of course, he had access to Striggio's libretto, which was composed as previously noted. The score reached a complete maturity, with words and music inseparably intertwined to convey story and emotion. "Here is music expressing words in

music with the full inspiration of a genius,” wrote Michael F. Robinson, in his book *Opera Before Mozart*.⁶

The date for the first performance of *Orfeo* was February 24, 1607, in the Galleria de Fiumi, a stage and orchestra in the Duke’s palace where gentlemen and ladies were in attendance. Reviews indicated that the duke was particularly pleased by a performance in which all the actors sang their parts. Cherubino Ferrari, the Mantuan Court theologian and poet, wrote that, “Both poet and musician depicted the inclinations of heart so successfully that it could not be done better. ... The music, observing due propriety, serves the poetry so well that nothing more beautiful is to be heard anywhere.” The Duke ordered a second performance on March 1 for a state visit from the Duke of Savoy. Subsequently, *Orfeo* was staged in Florence, Cremona, Milan and Turin, and on several occasions in Salzburg, Geneva and the Louvre in Paris.

In 1607 Monteverdi wrote a second opera, *L’Arianna*, for Francesco’s wedding to Margherita of Savoy. Concurrently, he

⁶ Robinson, Michael, *Opera Before Mozart*, London, Prometheus Books, 1972.

wrote a ballet and composed the music for an intermezzo to a play.

Poor health and deteriorating conditions led Monteverdi to return to Cremona for rest after this extreme schedule. He was dismissed from the Gonzaga court and became penniless prior to composing a mass for a competition for a position as maestro di cappella at San Marco in Venice.

Although he was not a Church musician, Monteverdi was appointed to San Marco. He promptly engaged Francesco Cavalli and Alessandro Grandi, who would become famous sacred composers. Monteverdi, himself, wrote many church pieces and masses, Magnificats, liturgy, and psalm settings. His secular compositions included more books of madrigal, a ballet (*Tirsi a Clori*), a dramatic cantata and a comic opera whose score was lost. He became profoundly gifted at creating integration of secular and ecclesial compositions.

In 1630, the plague erupted in Venice. Being greatly affected, Monteverdi decided to enter the Holy Order. He was admitted to the Tonsure in 1631, was named a deacon, and

wrote a grand mass for Thanksgiving service at San Marco Cathedral to celebrate the end of the epidemic.

By 1638, at the age of 70, when his musical career appeared over, Monteverdi revived and performed *L'Arianna* and wrote *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, inspired by the second half of Homer's *Odyssey*. Today it is considered one of the first modern operas.

Three years later, he wrote the *Coronation of Poppea*, which became one the first operas to use historical events, describing how Emperor Nero's mistress, Poppea, became the crown princess of Rome. Strobinski of the Paris Opera wrote: "Neither fortune nor virtue can vie with love, who, with a mere wave of the hand can transform the world: such is the eminence conveyed by the *Coronation of Poppea*, Monteverdi's last masterpiece."⁷

Thirty-five years had passed since his *Orfeo* opened the era of fables in music. In the city of Doges (Venice), riven by the of

⁷ Strobinski, J., Opening of Poppea at Paris Opera, The Monteverdi Trilogy, 2015.

Rome, the composer wrote his opera about desire and seduction, in which Poppea's beauty bewitched Nero and provoked the death of Seneca.

One by one, the pillars of morality crumbled before a bond was created with any of the characters, leaving us with the exquisitely delightful music. "In the twilight of his life, Monteverdi created a sensorial world, where the voice becomes a kiss before turning into a profound utterance."⁸ This introduction was written when the trilogy of, *Orfeo* and the *Return of Ulysses to his Homeland* and *Poppea* were performed as co-productions for Teatro alla Scala in Milan and the National Opera Paris in 2015.

Monteverdi's last two operas showed profound differences compared with *Orfeo*. Both were produced in Venice. *Ulysses* is more typical Venetian than *Orfeo*, considering its rapid succession of scenes (both comic and spectacular) and the quick pattern of recitative in song-like passages, the

⁸ Rhein, John von, Chicago Tribune, Quote of Gardiner, Oct. 10, 2017.

frequency of instrumental numbers, and the reduction of the orchestra to a basic string group that has formed the foundation of the orchestra for opera ever since. In *Poppea*, Monteverdi rejected the restless succession of contrasting scenes and relied more on the vivid and subtle characters as the leading figures of the drama. The music seemed to spring from the drama and give rise to a sense of perfect balance between music and action. The music in *Poppea* contains a melodic, emotional beauty that retains its impact today. In fact, Cincinnati Opera will perform the *Coronation of Poppea* in 2018, celebrating its continued interest in the Baroque work that most appropriately celebrates the 450th anniversary of the birth of the great Monteverdi.

The world of music is most indebted to Sir John Eliot Gardiner, who early in his career (1964) formed the Monteverdi Choir for the performances of the 1610 Vespers. Like Monteverdi's other large-scale works, the Vespers were little performed at the time. Gardiner, his choristers and baroque musicians spent much of their early years studying the Italian

poetry Monteverdi set to music for clues as to how best approach his madrigals and operas musically. Doing so, Gardiner said, taught them much about “how the rhythm of the text supports and bumps up against the harmonic rhythm, not unlike what you hear in jazz.”

Gardiner recognized that Monteverdi, born around the time of Shakespeare, Caravaggio, Copernicus and Galileo, shared a humanistic philosophy as artist, philosopher and scientist dedicated to transforming how people regarded the world that was moving from the Renaissance into the 17th Century.

This past 12 months, Maestro Gardiner and his musicians gave the world a year-long celebration of Monteverdi’s 450th birthday by performing the Monteverdi triptych -- *Orfeo*, *Return of Ulysses*, and *Coronation of Poppea*, before sold-out audiences in the great opera houses. As a result, many now know the creative genius and humanity that characterized the period that gave birth to Shakespeare and Monteverdi.

Today, the live performance of opera is the ultimate expression of the human condition. Story-telling is a fundamental human need, and no art form can exceed the ability of opera through the creativity of music, singing, dancing and drama to stimulate the mind, the spirit and the emotions that inspire, heal and connect art, history and human creativity. Today opera is available to everyone through radio, streaming digital, YouTube, Netflix and Metropolitan HD in theaters, in parks, churches and opera houses worldwide.

The impact of Claudio Monteverdi as the creator of modern music is appreciated today because he was more than a creator of style of historic significance. “He has survived through the age of Bach, Verdi and Stravinsky because of basic concepts of composition, harmony, melody, and expressiveness, all of which began with Monteverdi and have transcended the ephemeral nature of style.”⁹

[The following assessment was found in an anonymous letter written two years before Monteverdi died and printed in

⁹ Arnold, Denis, *Master Musicians Monteverdi*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990

the libretto of his last opera. The author imagines the fate of Monteverdi's music in the far distant future. He wrote, "Enjoy the music of the never-enough-praised Monteverdi, born to the world so as to rule over the emotions of others ... known in far-flung parts wherever music is known, will be sighed for in future ages, consoled by his most noble compositions, which are such to resist all ravages of time."

The future predicted in this letter has come true, as Monteverdi's works are appreciated today around the world. More than 300 works survive: his compositions exert a formative influence on the imaginations of living composers, literary writers, dramatists, and the current musical genre, celebrated from Nashville to Milan.^{10,11}

According to Schrade, his principal biographer, the universal appeal of Monteverdi compositions lie in the message that his work of art is inseparable from the human existence.⁵

Was Monteverdi a revolutionary? No, not in his opinion. In October 1623 he wrote, "I would rather be moderately praised for the new style than greatly praised for the ordinary."⁵

Finding music that would be appropriate for changing cultural circumstances seems to have been Monteverdi's method. He made his artistic work the medium of a message concerning man and human nature in which the work of art is inseparable from human existence. Moreover, in the final terms, history records him as a creator of modern music and the ever-evolving work known as opera.

10. Tommasini, Anthony. Sex and Death: It must be Opera. NY Times, Sept. 10, 2017.

11. Schmid, Rebecca. Monteverdi Set Human Emotion to Music. NY Times. July, 24, 2017.



Claudio Monteverdi

May 15, 1567 -- November 29, 1643

Portrait by Bernardo Strozzi, 1640, in Venice.